
A Socialist Education Manifesto

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ABSTRACT In this article the author suggests a number of measures and policies that should be part of a socialist education manifesto. These specific suggestions address curriculum and assessment issues such as an anti-discriminatory curriculum for equality, funded education outside the school, the development of critical thinking and democracy in schools, and teacher education and qualifications. The author locates these policies within his own class background and autobiography.

I have spent my lifetime as a teacher in ‘challenging’ primary and secondary schools and in teacher ‘training’ and in universities trying to tackle inequalities in schooling. I come from a working-class family brought up in some poverty, for example on free school meals (like a million others!), in St Martin’s Street, off the Lewes Road, Brighton. I went to Westlain Grammar School, my brothers to underfunded secondary modern schools, such as Queen’s Park and Moulsecomb. Three times as much was spent on the education of grammar school students as on secondary modern students! My children went to local state schools. The inequalities I have witnessed – and lived – as a child, and as a teacher and socialist political activist – have led me to spend my life fighting for greater social class equality in education and society, and against racism, sexism and homophobia.

A socialist approach to the curriculum, to pedagogy and to assessment would include the following demands.

1. Abolish league tables and Standard Assessment Tasks (SATs). Some external testing is necessary, but SATs so very often restrict teaching to ‘teaching to the test’, and result in undue stress. With high-stakes testing the curriculum gets narrowed, pupils/ students learn that education is instrumental, and only that which is externally tested is valued. This often stunts or kills ‘education as wonderment’: taking an enquiry or interest further and further, running with a theme or an interest. It inhibits seeing education as socially embedded and related to life and to individual and community problems, rather than as

something decontextualised. Such a high-stakes testing regime conveys through the hidden curriculum that students and teachers are powerless, that they are only pawns in a socially and economically predetermined and self-reproductive game. With regard to assessing how students are progressing, and what are their learning needs and their fascinations, some assessment, predominantly but not totally external, is needed. Schooling is a societal responsibility and needs to be accountable, partly to assess standards and partly to combat the under-expectation and underachievement that can arise where there is no external accountability.

2. Free up the curriculum so there can be more creativity and cross-subject/disciplinary work. Single subjects do comprise key concepts, data and understandings, but single-subject teaching can limit 'real-life', problem-based, inquiry-based, 'let's see where this leads us' approaches to teaching and learning.

3. Encourage critical thinking across the curriculum. Teach children not just 'what to think', but also 'how to think', including how to think critically about the media and politicians, and how to become aware of and evaluate alternative visions of the past, the present and the future. Teach pupils/students to ask questions of any curriculum and of any classroom or school or local, national or international community or society. Teach them to ask, 'Who benefits from this? Who loses? Which (raced and gendered) social class groups win and lose through this particular policy and process?'

4. Teach in schools for ecological literacy and a readiness to act for environmental justice as well as for economic and social justice. Encourage children to work for a fairer society offering more equal chances, pay packets and power, and for environmental sustainability.

5. Set up school councils – to encourage democratic understanding, citizenship, social responsibility, and the welcoming and valuing of 'student/ pupil voice'. These councils can of course be tokenistic, indeed, disempowering, if they are left to deal only with very minor matters. But if allowed wider powers, councils can empower. Accompanied by classroom discussion of the School's Council agendas, they can contribute to a 'hidden curriculum' in school which shows students/ pupils (and teachers and other school workers) that they themselves have democratic agency, and are subjects creating their own lives and history, rather than objects. This empowerment should also be curriculum linked, via a restoration of group work, interdisciplinary and problem-based activity, and appropriate assessment.

6. Ensure that the school curriculum/ 'hidden curriculum' is anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic – and, in a stark contrast to many books, articles and courses on social justice and equality issues – actually addresses and combats social class discrimination, disadvantage and exploitation. Schools and teachers should make sure they

encourage equality, and welcome different home and group cultures. They should welcome – rather than label, demean and degrade – individuals and groups such as the poor. As part of this, anti-bullying practices in every school must be fully implemented. Equality issues and anti-discrimination should be part of the actual curriculum, whether by permeating subjects or as discrete units/topics. Assessment procedures should be varied to meet varying ways of learning.

7. *An honest sex education curriculum in schools.* Teach children not just when to say ‘no’, but also when to say ‘yes’. Provide a programme focused on positives and pleasure and personal worth, not on stigmatising sex and sexualities.

8. *Restore free, funded residential centres and youth centres/youth clubs* for our children so they can widen their experience of life in safe circumstances and enhance their education beyond the confines of the home, village, town or city.

9. *Restore free adult education classes* in pastime and leisure studies as well as in vocational training/studies. Schooling and education should be for purposes wider than vocational development. They should be for wider cultural development and for pastimes/hobbies. The principle is that education should be life affirming, inquiring and have a wider social function than just economic reproduction. Another principle is that education centres such as schools should serve the interests of communities, not just of capital.

10. *Broaden and make compulsory teacher education and training.* Bring back the study and awareness of the social, political and psychological contexts of teaching that were pretty much abolished in 1992/93 and have not been brought back by any government. ‘Teacher Training’ should revert to its former title of ‘Teacher Education’, thus signalling that teachers are not apprentices to be trained, but intellectual leaders within the classroom, school and community. Teacher Education should include an understanding of and commitment to challenging and overturning racism, sexism, homophobia and other forms of under-expectation and discrimination such as that based on social class. These characteristics should be part of the standards to be achieved by student teachers and newly qualified teachers.

11. *No unqualified teachers!* Whatever life experiences soldiers or musicians or carpenters or kayakers may have had, they, as teachers, need a critical understanding of pedagogies and their impacts, of child development, of the different philosophies and ideologies of education and their impacts, of structural inequalities and how to combat them, and of different visions of education utopias and dystopias, in order to critically evaluate current schooling, education and society and to become ‘critical transformative intellectuals’.

In my jobs, firstly as a teacher, and now as a Professor of Education (and writer/editor of 23 books on education and equality) I have been to hundreds of schools and graded many hundreds of lessons and student teachers. Many of them are brilliant. With better funding, smaller class sizes, an end to the destructive competition between and within schools (if every school is a good local school), with more professional judgement allowed for teachers and with a critical intellectual theoretical analysis underpinning their practice, I look forward to a time when all state schools match the class sizes and results of the currently more lavishly funded private schools. And working-class kids – black, brown, white – get the fair deal currently trumpeted – but in actuality denied – by all four major parties.

Bibliography

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